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LOS ANGELES TIMES
5 September 1986

Spy Reportedly Unmasked by China Defector

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WASHINGTON—A senior Chinese intelligence officer, reported by foreign news agencies this week to have defected to the West, is the source who tipped the United States last fall to the 33-year espionage career of CIA turncoat Larry Wu-tai Chin, according to a government official familiar with the case.

Yu Zhensan, once head of the foreign affairs bureau of China's Ministry of State Security, was spirited to the United States "within a couple of weeks, one way or the other," of Chin's arrest last Nov. 22, said the official, who refused to be identified.

The source said that Yu has been debriefed by American intelligence officials, provided with a new identity and probably resettled elsewhere since then, not necessarily in the United States.

The official refused to explain why Yu chose to flee China or where he is now living. A French report that Yu is now in Taiwan has been denied by a government spokesman in Taipei.

Chin, a 63-year-old retired CIA translator and intelligence officer at the time of his arrest, committed suicide in his Virginia jail cell last February, two weeks after being convicted of spying for the Chinese.

A Chinese agent since 1952, he had access to virtually all secret U.S. documents on China and the Far East after 1970 and probably gave most of them to Peking, U.S. experts have said. One privately described his work for the Chinese as a "disaster" for American security interests.

The unmasking of Chin last fall clearly was a shock to CIA officials, who had given him a medal for superior service upon his 1981 retirement and later had rehired him for part-time work at the agency, which had a shortage of Chinese-language translators.

Chin speculated during his trial last December that one of his Chinese contacts had defected to the United States and turned him in, but U.S. officials so far have declined to say publicly how they learned of his betrayal.

After Agence France-Presse and the Japanese news service Kyodo reported Yu's defection this week, however, an American official confirmed that it was Yu who had tipped the CIA to Chin's activities.

Yu, said to be the son of two prominent Chinese revolutionaries and now in his late 30s, was one of the top officials in the Ministry of State Security, which was created in 1983 to handle both intelligence and counterespionage. He is among the highest Chinese officials to defect to the West since the Communists took control of the country in 1949.

His post reportedly gave him wide knowledge of Chinese espionage activities abroad, including the names of Chinese agents and suspected agents from other nations working in China.

The French and Japanese news services quoted foreign sources as saying that Yu had fled to the West through Hong Kong last January, but the U.S. official indicated that he left China well before then. Defections by high-level Communist officials often are kept secret by American intelligence officials to confuse hostile intelligence services and protect the defectors.

Rumors of Yu's flight to the West began circulating among Chinese officials about three months ago, diplomatic sources have said, but the Chinese government has declined to comment on the issue.

U.S. and other diplomatic sources speculate that Yu's defection has spurred the Chinese to retaliate twice—in July by detaining and expelling a New York Times correspondent, John F. Burns, and last December by arresting an American citizen on espionage charges.

That citizen, 67-year-old Roland Shensu Loo of Los Angeles, was accused of spying for Taiwan, but the Chinese press took great pains to link Taiwanese spying activities to the United States. Loo's conviction was announced by the Chinese last month, and he is incarcerated in China.

Times staff writer Jim Mann in Peking contributed to this story.